



MINISTERIAL SPEECH

Senator the Hon Joe Ludwig

Cabinet Secretary

Special Minister of State

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Book Launch

Australia: The State of Democracy

Canberra

Wednesday 14 October 2009

Introduction

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to officially launch *Australia: The State of Democracy*.

First may I acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners of these lands, and pay my respect to their elders, both past and present.

I would like to applaud all those who have contributed to this book, particularly its Canberra authors Professor Marian Sawer, (Dr Norman Abjorensen and Dr Phil Larkin.

Taking an audit or survey of the health of democracy in Australia is an important project, and the end result is a book, which I'm sure will stimulate debate among readers.

I'd also take this opportunity to congratulate Dr Abjorensen, who this week was named as a recipient of an Australian Prime Ministers' Centre Fellowship, to provide a research paper on Prime Minister Alfred Deakin during the first decade of Federation.

I would also like to commend:

- the book's other academic contributors;
- the teams at Australian National University and
- the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University of Technology; and
- the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Stockholm who auspice the Democratic Audit concept and framework.

I must apologise for not having organised this book launch sooner – but I wanted an opportunity to read the book before I came here this evening and I don't get a lot of opportunities to read.

The delay also meant that I had the opportunity to make some reforms to relevant areas covered by the book, such as parliamentary entitlements, or the Government's response to the ALRC report, which I launched this morning.

Is Democracy in Australia flourishing or hollow?

For those who have not yet had the rewarding experience of reading *Australia: The State of Democracy*, it's driven by the question: **is democracy in Australia flourishing or hollow?**

It is a comprehensive book that not only describes the democracy which we live in, but also that which we should aspire to.

That is an important distinction – while Australia is one of the world's oldest continuous democracies and one of the most stable, it is not a system that is incapable of change.

An example in microcosm –and I am indebted to the Parliamentary Library for this information - we stand here in the ACT, a part of NSW until 1911.

When it became the Federal Capital Territory (as it then was known), like Washington DC on which it was modelled, the ACT had no representation at all in the Federal Parliament until 1948, and until 1966 a representative without full voting rights.

There was no ACT representation in the Senate, until passage by the Whitlam Government of a double dissolution bill which saw the first Territory Senators subsequently elected in 1975.

Self-government (even if it was possibly unwanted self-government) did not come to the ACT until 20 years ago in May this year.

So while it is true that Australia does have a system that, both through the processes of the Senate or through referenda, usually relies on a significant degree of consensus for reform to occur.

But what should we reform to? Here the work in front of us today is of most value - suggesting the changes needed to achieve a better democracy in Australia.

I, like the book's authors, believe that while there are many strong aspects of Australian democracy, there is certainly much scope for improvement.

Electoral Reform Green Paper process

This is because, as I recently stated in the Government's second electoral reform Green Paper, democracy is not now, and never will, be a 'finished product'.

An Australian living in 2009 understands democracy in a radically different way to a person who voted in the inaugural national parliament in 1901.

For example, with the exceptions of the states of South Australia and Western Australia, women were excluded from voting in 1901. In that year too, across Australia, Indigenous Australians and young people aged under 21 were also excluded.

Australia's electoral process and system of democracy have improved since then, but further reforms are needed.

The authors identify a number of issues now under my area of ministerial responsibility including transparency, electoral reform and privacy reform.

The Government is working hard to modernise the Commonwealth Electoral Act so it is relevant to Australians in the 21st century.

The Act has not been the subject of a comprehensive review since 1984 and many of its fundamental principles had not been scrutinised for a long time before that.

The Government's Green Paper process, much like this book, seeks to determine what democracy in Australia means to us today.

I'm looking forward to reading the submissions to the second Green Paper and am still working through the government's response to the first.

The important thing is that the Government recognises that reform will not be achieved without a significant level of community consensus and that is why in part, the Government has elected to take the path of public consultation through the Green paper process, and I encourage all of you to participate in that process which you can read more about on the Prime Minister's website at www.pmc.gov.au.

I would hope that many of the issues which are addressed in the book and which the Rudd Labor Government is currently working on, will come to fruition to the benefit of Australian democracy.

Conclusion

Speaking personally, I found *Australia: The State of Democracy* a succinct, highly readable and useful reference tool.

It is an excellent contribution to the nation, particularly I imagine for students, journalists and politicians.

For the overseas reader studying Australia it brings a wealth of material and a depth of perspective.

It also adds to the global democratic picture – which is important considering that one of the aims of developing the international Audit framework in the first place was to assist newer democracies.

It deserves to be widely read and discussed.

I would once again congratulate all the contributors to the book and declare *Australia: The State of Democracy* launched.

Thank you.